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3. Communicating Delegitimisation: Political Information and Challenges to Democracy

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Abstract

Political information that is disproportionately negative and uncivil may increase cleavages in society, fuel cynicism, and erode a shared understanding of factual information. ASCoR's focus on delegitimising communication has made an important contribution to our understanding of the nature, context, and potential democratic consequences of such potentially harmful information. Especially in digital settings, information that is at odds with democratic principles and objectivity may be disseminated at a high pace, whilst bypassing gatekeeping and fact-checking routines of established media. Although we conclude that we should be worried about delegitimising communication, discussions about pressing issues such as disinformation, polarisation, and echo chambers may also be harmful, as they can fuel overall and disproportionate cynicism toward (political) communication.

Keywords: polarisation, populism, disinformation, echo chambers, negative campaigning

Introduction

Many trends in political communication and journalism highlight negative forms of information that oppose democratic principles of truth-seeking, objectivity, and balance. These trends that can potentially undermine

democratic values are accelerated by developments in digital media, which allow for the platforming and fast spread of information that has a delegitimising impact on society. In line with this trend, ASCoR researchers have mostly focused on analysing forms of communication that are potentially harmful for democracy. Among other things, we have focused on the centrality of conflict and negativity in political campaigns, the content and style of delegitimising populist communication, accusations of bias and other forms of criticism towards established media institutions, and the dissemination of mis- and disinformation. We consider these forms of information as potentially problematic as they may stand in the way of a rational exchange of ideas in society. Although negativity, conflict, and an appeal to ordinary people may be accepted or prevalent forms of political campaigning, we argue that the disproportionate use of such communication and its digital amplification may threaten democratic outcomes. In this chapter, we, therefore, use delegitimising communication as an overarching term to synthesise the research foci of ASCoR researchers studying political communication and journalism. This umbrella term refers to any form of communication that may threaten core deliberative and representative democratic values, such as a diversity of viewpoints, dialogue, and a constructive exchange of arguments between disagreeing groups in society, and which may be directed at democratic institutions that embody these values. It can also involve communication that is uncivil, one-sided, and (intentionally) false. We refer to it as delegitimising as it may attack or threaten conventional information and political institutions, such as mainstream and public media, and fuel cynical and distrusting views in democracy.

Because delegitimising communication may attack conventional truths and reinforce cleavages in society (e.g., van Dalen, 2021), we consider such information as problematic. Considering that the media are central players in conveying such information to citizens, a media focus on delegitimising information is crucial. Against this backdrop, it is important to map the role of (social) media in platforming and amplifying delegitimising communication, which has been a central theme in the empirical endeavours of ASCoR researchers. Here, we specifically pay attention to social and digital media as receptive platforms for delegitimising communication. As social media are not restricted by gatekeepers and the journalistic norms and practices of traditional media, they may play a central role in the communication of delegitimising communication. This has, for example, been established in research on populist communication (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) and negative campaigning (Petkevic & Nai, 2022). In the absence of traditional

gatekeepers, various types of uncivil, hostile, negative, and delegitimising messages may find their way to the audience in an unfiltered manner.

Here, we should also consider the negative consequences of delegitimising narratives for journalism as a profession, as well as for the news institutions journalists are affiliated with. In line with the abundance of counterfactual narratives and disinformation online, journalists and other knowledge disseminators are often accused of spreading fake news, whilst they also face severe threats on their safety. Likewise, current debates about “alternative facts,” fake news claims, and accusations of left-wing bias targeted at mainstream news outlets threaten to undermine the role of established media. Severe threats towards journalists are notable especially outside of the Western countries that we usually study (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). Thus, next to the threats of delegitimising communication for democracy, such information may also harm the discipline of journalism and the freedom with which journalists may cover democratic processes.

In the sections that follow, we will outline the approaches used by ASCoR researchers in mapping delegitimising communication. After this, we will present the main contributions stemming from these approaches. Here it should be noted that the findings and conclusions documented in this chapter mostly reflect general patterns across different settings in Western Europe and the United States. Whenever relevant, we will explicate to what extent findings are generalizable across Western countries, or whether country-specific differences are relevant to consider. We will end with an overview of directions for future research, and our ambitions to more comprehensively map delegitimising communication in a changing (digital) media landscape. Although we deal with a broad topic—delegitimising communication—we believe that many different research foci fall under this form of information. Specifically, in this chapter, we will review research that focuses on information that (1) emphasises negativity and conflict, (2) attacks the established order, and herewith (3) potentially threatens or undermines democracy.

Empirical findings

In this section, we discuss the different approaches taken by ASCoR researchers to map delegitimising communication. Overall, our research has mostly focused on a quantitative and/or automated assessment of delegitimising communication. Thus, most of the research findings presented here are not based on interpretative methods; rather, they paint a general picture of trends in delegitimising communication in big data sets.

A dominant line of research within delegitimising communication focuses on populist communication. That is, communication supporting the idea that society is “ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Although references to the people and their will are not delegitimising on their own, populism’s emphasis on a moral divide between the people and “corrupt” elites is regarded as a delegitimising social identity frame (e.g., Bos et al., 2020). Especially the last element in populist ideology—the claim that politics should be an expression of the will of the people—is delegitimising in nature. It delegitimises all claims and issue stances that are, in the eye of the populist, not in line with “what the people want,” legitimising an anti-pluralist or monist perspective on politics and democracy. Various ASCoR researchers studied the idiosyncrasy in communication by populist parties and politicians, showing that they are more populist in rhetoric and style (Bos & Brants, 2014) and more negative, incorporating more attacks and fear messages (Nai, 2021), including the most harmful types of conflict frames (van der Goot et al., 2022), and spreading more misinformation (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Yet, these studies mostly refer to research done in Western Europe, and herewith may not be directly transferable to other settings, such as bipartisan or more polarised settings. Additionally, many of these studies rely on research on populist radical right parties, and knowledge is much less saturated on the communication elements present in communication by left-wing populist parties.

Focusing on the dissemination of populist messages, Bos and Brants (2014) used a quantitative content analysis to map the degree of populist communication across different media over 20 years in the Netherlands—also distinguishing between populism used by the media and attention to populist ideas by journalists. Similar to Hameleers et al. (2019), they found that populist ideas expressed by traditional news media are extremely rare—indicating that news media may not directly contribute to the platforming of populist ideas that potentially undermine democracy. Yet, this potentially works differently in countries where more populist and hyper-partisan news outlets are part of the mainstream media landscape, such as the United States. Recently, in the Netherlands, we also see that hyper-partisan news outlets such as the populist radical right broadcaster *Ongehoord Nederland* give a podium to populist ideas on the public broadcaster.

Findings from studies in the United States on delegitimising forms of disinformation that attack established truths confirm some of the patterns

found in Western European studies on populism. Traditional media most likely merely play a role as amplifiers of newsworthy deceptive information, for example, by repeating the false claims of political actors expressed online (Hameleers, 2021) and covering negative campaigns as well as candidates with a “darker” personality profile (e.g., Nai & Maier, in press). Traditional media may thus be part of the problem as accelerators of problematic forms of communication but often refrain from using such coverage themselves. Thus, looking at populist communication, disinformation, and negative campaigning, most research findings indicate that traditional (non-partisan and quality) media and journalists do not communicate in delegitimising manners themselves, although they may give a favourable and uncritical platform to political actors that are delegitimising. By uncritically offering a stage to such communication, disproportionately negative, uncivil, and untrue messages may be legitimised.

In this light, the increasing focus on digital media by ASCoR researchers may be explained as digital platforms offer an uncritical and unfiltered stage for the communication of delegitimising communication. On digital platforms, and in social media in particular, selective exposure to congenial or like-minded views (e.g., Trilling et al., 2017; Vermeer et al., 2020), the experience of like-mindedness due to “fringe” bubbles (e.g., Möller et al., 2018), and the AI-driven curation of content are specifically important to consider. They are assumed to platform and contribute to the fast-paced dissemination of delegitimising content. That is, targeted misinformation in the form of deepfakes are assumed to spread and flourish online (Dobber et al., 2021), and AI generates like-minded fringe bubbles of citizens distancing themselves from democratic and legitimate information.

Yet, despite the many worrisome popular discussions on these issues, ASCoR researchers have also relativised important concerns on the threats posed by delegitimising communication and its online dissemination. In that regard, Möller et al. (2018) emphasised that filter bubbles and echo chambers are not as pervasive as often suggested: The problem of such isolated spaces is rather small and extreme groups that may isolate themselves from the other side by only engaging with attitude-reinforcing communication are rare. Wojcieszak et al. (2023) show that due to the very limited fraction of news in people’s online activities, the impact of online news exposure on polarisation is absent. On a more worrying note, a recent study by Simon et al. (2022) shows that extremist and delegitimising content can spread quite easily on a relatively open discussion platform such as Telegram. This reveals that when aiming to understand the content of delegitimising communication, the context matters: Such communication may not be found in

the general media ecology but is more likely to be present in specific digital spaces, and may be disseminated and shared by people who are distrusting toward established institutions and conventional truths.

This does not mean that all concerns about delegitimising information are not backed up by empirical evidence. In online settings, populist communication is often communicated in hostile and uncivil ways (Nai, 2021)—even resonating with hate speech and the exclusion of out-groups (Hameleers, 2021). And such “darker” forms of elite rhetoric can, under certain circumstances, foster (support for) political violence (Nai & Young, 2023). Likewise, although disinformation and deepfakes are less present than assumed, they can be communicated and shared by distrusting segments of the audience (Dobber et al., 2021)—and their online targeting to vulnerable segments of society may indicate that they contribute to polarisation (Hameleers, 2021). And, most importantly, the fact that journalists rarely engage in negative, populist, and uncivil communication themselves does not rule out the indirect effects these campaign tactics have on journalism and trust in journalistic information. Dark communication that disproportionately focuses on conflict and negativity—if not too dark—is still considered newsworthy, and the populist representative claim is especially difficult to ignore. Here journalists find themselves in a *Catch-22*: neglecting populists serves their anti-elite and anti-media argument, while covering them—even in a critical way—legitimises their political existence (e.g., Bos et al., 2011; Vliegthart et al., 2012).

Here, we should also underline the context of delegitimising communication: the prevalence of (societal and mediatised) discussions on issues such as fake news, filter bubbles, populism, conspiracies, and misleading information may reinforce distrust and confusion in society. For example, because fake news is used as a delegitimising label, affecting the perceived credibility of journalistic news stories (Bos et al., 2023), creating uncertainty in whom to trust (Brosius et al., 2022). In line with this, trends toward delegitimising communication may pose a severe threat on journalism as a profession—when facing accusations of fake news, bias, and a distortion of reality, journalists may no longer feel equipped to enact their crucial role perceptions as watchdogs beyond the dissemination of factual information (Balod & Hameleers, 2021). Future research should equally consider whether—and, if so, by whom and for which reasons—accusations of spreading misinformation or promoting “alternative facts” are used strategically, for example, to attack political opponents in a negative campaigning setting. To the best of our knowledge, no existing research has (yet) investigated such crucial intersection between promotion of disinformation and strategic accusations

to do so for electoral purposes. Generally, we are thus in need of research that maps the motivations behind the communication of delegitimising information: What gains are sought, and what benefits are foreseen when political opponents are attacked or polarised cleavages emphasised?

In accordance with these developments, we see an increasing politicisation of public media, for example, through accusations of bias directed towards public news outlets such as public broadcasters in Europe. While public media hold a neutral function in democratic societies, claims that these institutions would supposedly not be neutral, but biased towards certain ideologies or political groups within society may seriously impair their legitimacy, and thus enhance an erosion of trust in media and democratic institutions more broadly (Brosius et al., 2022).

Contributions to theory and practice

By mapping the nature and context of delegitimising communication, ASCoR researchers have made several important contributions to theory and practice. The relativisation of the threats associated with echo chambers and filter bubbles have contributed to our understanding of the mechanisms of selective exposure and the role technological developments play in the curation of information flows (Möller et al., 2018, but also see Simon et al., 2022). Overall, our research has shown that delegitimising communication is often fragmented in nature, platformed on social media, and amplified by the affordances of the digital society. Yet, not everyone is exposed to such communication, and we cannot state that delegitimising communication has dominated political communication in the current information landscape.

Our extensive research agenda on populism, negative campaigning, and conflict framing has revealed various important theoretical insights on typologies of populism (Hameleers, 2021) and their delegitimising mechanisms (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2017). Related, we have contributed to a more refined understanding of conflict frames (Bartholomé et al., 2018; van der Goot et al., 2022)—and on how these different forms of “aggressive” elite rhetoric interplay, for instance, by focusing on the use of negative campaigning, populist appeals, and negative emotionality across the world, and their joint effects on election results and media attention (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019; Maier & Nai, 2020). These theoretical and empirical contributions spearheaded more comprehensive insights related to the conditions under which certain forms of delegitimising communication may undermine democratic principles, and herewith also require interventions. Hence,

by indicating that some platforms, sources, and groups are more likely to disseminate delegitimising content, and by mapping for which sub-groups in society such messages may be problematic, we have contributed to a better understanding of the granular and fragmented nature of problematic forms of communication. More specifically, our research has contributed to a more refined understanding of the styles used to frame populist ideas, and the extent to which populist communication that stresses a divide between “us and them” may harm democratic principles such as civility and mutual respect. Research on the nature of disinformation has revealed how the truth—an important foundation of representative democracy—may be undermined and delegitimised deliberately. Studies on conflict framing and negative campaigning similarly contribute to our understanding of how the attack on out-groups and incivility may contribute to a context where the rational exchange of ideas between disagreeing citizens is undermined.

Research by ASCoR has also contributed conceptually to understanding various forms of delegitimising attributions towards the media. Qualitative, explorative work by ASCoR researchers on how bias accusations towards public media are constructed by political elites and opinion leaders has generated important insights into the extent to which academic debates about media bias correspond to the actual debates on media bias (Gravestijn et al., 2023). This study exemplified the broader nature and directionality of bias accusations towards public service media, and distinguished it from other forms of media criticisms. It is important to understand what bias accusations citizens are exposed to, as it potentially affects their trust in media and general opinion of news outlets (Bos et al., 2023). Moreover, a disparity between understanding bias in academic debates and public debates will potentially impair addressing and remedying perceptions of biased news outlets amongst citizens, and thus will not effectively contribute to bolstering perceived legitimacy of public media in democratic societies.

On a more general level, ASCoR researchers have advanced theories on how the setting of digital affordances (i.e., social media, algorithms, AI) have changed the nature of delegitimising communication: It has become more personalised, tailored, uncivil, whilst empowering different voices to express themselves via online platforms (Simon et al., 2022). Although the main focus of our work has been on negative ramifications for democracy, social media and technological developments should not be regarded as bad in their own right. While ASCoR researchers focus on positive implications of digital media less, the opportunity for community formation, information sharing, and cross-cutting information exposure can be contrasted to the problematic context of delegitimising communication. However, by

relativising the omnipresent concerns on the allegedly destabilising impact of echo chambers, filter bubbles, deepfakes, misinformation and populism by the media, we have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the democratic consequences of delegitimising communication in a digital information ecology. Although we highlight the problematic potential of delegitimising communication, we also emphasise that such communication is specifically harmful for specific groups of society, such as citizens with cynical views on politics or people who are already inclined to select delegitimising information (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018).

On a more general level, the insights presented in this chapter lay the foundation of a theory that integrates various forms of problematic and negative forms of conflictive communication under the framework of delegitimising communication. Hence, moving beyond isolated concepts such as disinformation, populism, or negative campaigning, delegitimising communication revolves around negatively biased information that may—both intentionally and unintentionally—harm democracy by attacking conventional truths, democratic institutions or the established political order. Such communication is at odds with truth telling, balance, and objectivity. Its causes may be psychological (i.e., people's preference for like-minded views), technological (i.e., the platforming of delegitimising communication online), and sociopolitical (i.e., the success of populist movements that have mainstreamed delegitimising communication). A comprehensive model of the context, content, causes and potential democratic consequences of delegitimising communication makes an important theoretical contribution to communication science. Such a more comprehensive framework may help us to understand under which conditions delegitimising communication may be expressed, and what its intended outcomes are. At this stage, ASCoR researchers have mostly focused on the content and effects of this theoretical framework. Future endeavours may focus more on the causes and contexts, for example, through interpretative methods that reveal the motivations for communicators to communicate in delegitimising ways, or to disseminate such information through social media platforms.

To extend the impact of our research agenda on delegitimising communication, we also translate our findings to practical implications and recommendations. Our research on mis- and disinformation has, for example, important implications for the design of effective interventions. Among other things, our findings indicate that fact-checks are effective, but only when they are selected by audience segments that were actually persuaded by false information (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Hence, as most people select fact-checks that confirm their opposition to disinformation, it is crucial to

assess how corrective information can reach people that tend to believe the refuted false claims in the first place. In addition, our research indicates that media literacy interventions only work effectively if they can enhance trust in factually accurate information (van der Meer et al., 2023). These empirical conclusions are widely shared with practitioners in journalism and media literacy education. To offer a few examples, ASCoR researchers are part of the EDMO network that connects academic insights on fact-checking to actual suggestions for interventions implemented by fact-checkers in the Netherlands and Belgium.¹ We are also developing new media literacy tools that can be used as a browser plug-in to warn people about dubious information. On a more general level, we aim to connect our research to various stakeholders in journalism and political communication to inform the development of potential interventions that could alleviate the threats of delegitimising information. At the same time, however, we also offer evidence for the omnipresent, and at times inflated, concerns about dark and undemocratic forms of communication that allegedly dominate online.

Next steps

As explicated in the previous sections, ASCoR focuses predominately on the negative aspects of information flows; as such, the “dark” side of communication tends to prevail in our ongoing lines of research. However, the affordances of online media may also offer opportunities for civil, democratic, and diverse exchanges between citizens, as people with different views may come together at a marketplace of ideas. Hence, online, people may be confronted more with different views as compared to their direct offline environment that tends to be more homogenous (Trilling et al., 2017). In addition, the developments of AI, algorithms and engaging personalised communication can also be used as solutions to the problems facing journalism and political communication. Our future research agenda could make solutions-oriented journalism and political communication more central, herewith offering evidence-based suggestions for how the potential problems of delegitimising communication and growing levels of distrust in political institutions and information may be remedied. To offer a few examples, research on disinformation could focus more on the feasibility of media literacy programmes, and research on polarisation could investigate the potential of depolarising forms of online communication.

1 <https://benedmo.eu/>.

Another avenue for future research concerns a better understanding of the causes and context of delegitimising communication. The focus on quantitative and computational methods has merits, but it may overlook the perceptions of people producing and consuming delegitimising information. In addition, we know markedly little about why certain delegitimising communication is expressed, which makes research on potential causes crucial. For example, we know little about the conditions under which false information is disseminated unintentionally (i.e., due to honest mistakes) or intentionally (i.e., to steer political perceptions). To advance this line of research, we could focus more on qualitative and interpretative methods, such as in-depth interviews with citizens exposing themselves to delegitimising communication, politicians spreading disinformation or negative information, or journalists who are affected by delegitimising attacks. Generally, the changing role of journalists in a time of constant delegitimising attacks, and the potential undermining role of alternative forms of media online, deserves more attention in our future research. Hence, especially as we theorise that delegitimising information is often intentional and goal-directed, focusing on just mapping content features may overlook underlying motivations to spread or create delegitimising narratives. Our ambition is to rely on more systematic interpretative qualitative work to unravel the drivers of delegitimising communication. In addition, we also consider it important to further extend our research agenda to studying the (potentially harmful) effects of delegitimising narratives and labels on citizens—specifically in terms of how they view journalists and news outlets to which these delegitimising labels are directed, and whether exposure to these delegitimising narratives affect these perceptions.

Finally, we would like to highlight the importance of comparative research, or research conducted in a diversity of contexts. The conclusions we reach about the threats of delegitimising communication mainly stem from empirical evidence collected in Western Europe or the United States. This means that we cannot automatically make inferences about the nature and implications of delegitimising communication across the globe. Arguably, journalists in less free countries with high levels of state ownership in the media landscape face different challenges than journalists who can work independently. Likewise, the nature of disinformation narratives is very different when a state is pushing propaganda narratives to silence the opposition compared to a country where disinformation mainly comes from foreign states, such as Russian (via the Internet Research Agency). More comparative research designs, or the extension of our geographical lenses in empirical research, may offer more nuanced insights of the role of

contexts, such as media and political systems, in the expression, platforming, and perceptions of delegitimising communication.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have defined delegitimising communication as negative information that focuses on conflict and societal oppositions. Here, reflecting the work of ASCoR researchers, we especially focused on populism, negative campaigning, and disinformation. Such communication may intentionally and unintentionally harm democracy by fuelling polarisation, cynicism, and distrust in established knowledge. In recent years, delegitimising communication has obtained an important epistemic dimension: Negative messages may not only stress divides between groups based on ideological or partisan cleavages, but also relate to cleavages between opposed truths and the delegitimation of established information. As a major theoretical contribution, we believe that a focus on delegitimising communication may bring together various forms of harmful content, and this approach allows for an assessment of the context, causes, and effects that such communication may have across democracies. Hence, rather than studying negative forms of communication in isolation, a comprehensive theoretical account of delegitimising communication may point to shared root causes, mechanisms behind effects, and solutions that help to make societies more resilient to delegitimising content.

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